

China and the Catholic Church in mid-1985

To report on the present situation of the Catholic Church in China is a difficult task considering the fog surrounding official news releases. In mid-1985, the Chinese government sounded three trumpet calls which attracted the attention of the Catholic world. Some interpreted these calls as announcing better times; others considered them muddled and uncertain.

The reopening of the Beitang

It has been announced that the Beitang, Beijing's venerable cathedral, is being repaired at government expense and will be reopened for worship at the end of the year. The communists had confiscated this property which had long been the religious centre of Beijing (Peking) and converted it to their own use. When I visited there in October 1984, the edifice was neglected and inaccessible to visitors. The reopening of the church is in line with a government policy which restores to the care of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) many Catholic churches overlooked by the ravages of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). This move in the direction of more religious freedom means that Beijing will now have three Catholic churches. Another church, the Xitang or West Church, is still being used as a factory. The restoration of the Beitang was started early this year at a cost of US\$350,000.

Bishop Jin travels abroad

Aloysius Jin Luxian, 69, travelled to Hong Kong and Macau in the summer of 1985. Jin is one of the two auxiliary bishops of Shanghai consecrated on 27 January this year and also rector of the regional seminary at Sheshan. This seminary is putting up new buildings, the cornerstone having been laid on 12 May. Since his appointment as rector, Jin, who holds a theology degree from the Gregorian University in Rome, has been circularising foreign Catholic institutions, begging for money. Some say that this belies the financial independence which is one of the hallmarks of the Three-Self national churches. Jin was formerly a Jesuit. For many years, he served as interpreter and translator for the Chinese government. It was noted that, soon after his return from government service to Shanghai, several of

his Jesuit confrères were arrested. He plans to visit Europe in 1986 at the invitation of the Herder Publishing Company.

When asked about his relationship to the CCPA, Jin asserted: "I myself am not a member of the Patriotic Association." In fact, Jin was consecrated for the CCPA by Bishop Zhang Jiaoshu, 93, known for his anti-Vatican statements. It is common knowledge, however, that the vast majority of the CCPA bishops yearn for the day when they dare proclaim publicly the faith which they treasure in their hearts. Their attitude is well known to Beijing and Rome though both sides avoid explicit reference to it.

The release of Bishop Gong Pinmei

The confusion which besets church reporting has nowhere been more evident than in the case of Bishop Gong Pinmei, 84, the legitimate bishop of Shanghai, imprisoned since 1955 and released on 3 July 1985. After years of being kept *incommunicado*, he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1960 "as a counter-revolutionary leader camouflaged in religious clothes". Bishop Gong was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International and became the most eloquent symbol of Catholic resistance to state control of the church. None of the high-ranking prelates who visited Shanghai, such as Cardinals Etchegaray, König and Sin, and, quite recently, Bishop Wu of Hong Kong, were allowed to see him, the excuse being that "the prison is not ready for a visit".

The Chinese government has repeatedly tried to get rid of its tiresome prisoner. They did not want him to die in jail. Nor did they want to release him, except after a confession of guilt. Gong stubbornly refused. He kept insisting that his name be cleared first; that the other priests imprisoned with him be set free, and that he be restored to his rightful see of Shanghai.

The sole information about Bishop Gong's release comes from an official communiqué sent out by Xinhua News Agency on 4 July: "Gong Pinmei, former Catholic bishop, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1960 for high treason, was released on parole here yesterday . . . The court decision on Gong's parole said that he had ad-

mitted his crimes and showed repentance during the time he was serving his sentence. Gong said at the court trial that he would abide by the law and pledged allegiance to the country." These bare facts, as reported by the government agency, were repeated *verbatim* in several papers. Headlines added some embroidery: "Paroled bishop promises to snap Vatican ties" (*Hong Kong Standard*, 6 July 1985); "Silent Church suffers blow" (*South China Morning Post*, 6 July); "A bishop 'repents'" (*Newsweek*, 15 July and *Time*, 15 July). Informed by Xinhua, we are told that "the ex-bishop kissed the ring of the Patriotic Bishop of Shanghai and promised to act under his guidance; he was welcomed by the Shanghai diocese". The "patriotic" bishop of Shanghai is Zhang Jiashu. He said: "As long as Gong obeys the law and is patriotic, he may lead a happy evening of his life and pursue his religious studies" (*China Daily*, 6 July).

The local press was sceptical about the veracity of these reports. The wording was strangely reminiscent of that used when the legitimate bishop of Canton, Tang Yiming, was released after 22 years in prison. He too reportedly "repented", a claim he later strenuously denied. Xinhua itself, in the course of an interview with Gong, con-

tradicted itself: "The second Xinhua report contained some intriguing differences from the first" (*Hong Kong Standard*, 6 July). Nothing in what Gong said hinted at repentence, let alone at a break with the Vatican.

China experts surmise that Gong's release may contribute to "an understanding" with the Vatican. Such a trend has long been in the air. It is an open secret that there have been diplomatic feelers. Moreover, the Chinese government is aware that it can in no way count on the CCPA. The overwhelming majority of Chinese Catholics have shown admirable boldness in confessing their faith. Impartial observers are convinced that it is a wise pragmatic gesture of the Chinese government to prepare to abandon its sinking religious ship in view of the fact that Fu Tieshan, the "patriotic" Bishop of Beijing, admits that "there could be three million Catholics in China who have kept a secret allegiance to the Vatican" (*South China Morning Post*, 7 November 1984). This means eighty percent of all Chinese Catholics. Reconciliation with the Vatican, therefore, has become a useful need. It should, considering Beijing's wish "to learn truth from facts", be heeded.

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USSR Baptist Congress

The Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists in the USSR held its national congress on 21-23 March 1985 in Moscow on the theme of "Let your light shine before men". It was the sixth congress since the Union's inaugural congress in 1944 but, counting all the previous congresses of its two constituents, the Baptist Union and the Evangelical Christian Union, the congress was the 43rd. The present constitution requires the holding of a congress every three to five years. In fact slightly more than five years had elapsed since the previous congress in December 1979 (see *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 3), and the congress thus failed to be held in the centennial year of the first Russian Baptist Congress in 1884.

The main report on behalf of the Presidium of the Union's Council was delivered by Alexei Bychkov, the General Secretary. The statistics quoted by Bychkov reflected

the same moderate progress that had been reported five years earlier. Since 1979 40,000 new members had been baptised and 5,600 received from unregistered Pentecostal, Baptist and Mennonite congregations. It was reported that 268 new congregations had registered. [Other reports indicate that in Ukraine alone, 3,000 Pentecostals joined the Union, and that 84 of the registered congregations were in Ukraine and a further 26 in Moldavia. The Moldavian churches had also baptised 2,500 new converts. These figures are a good indication of the relatively greater strength of the Baptist churches in these two republics — Moldavia, for example, with little more than one percent of the USSR's population, had over six percent of the new members.]

Basic Christian literature also continued to be published or imported. Ten thousand Russian Bibles were imported via the Un-